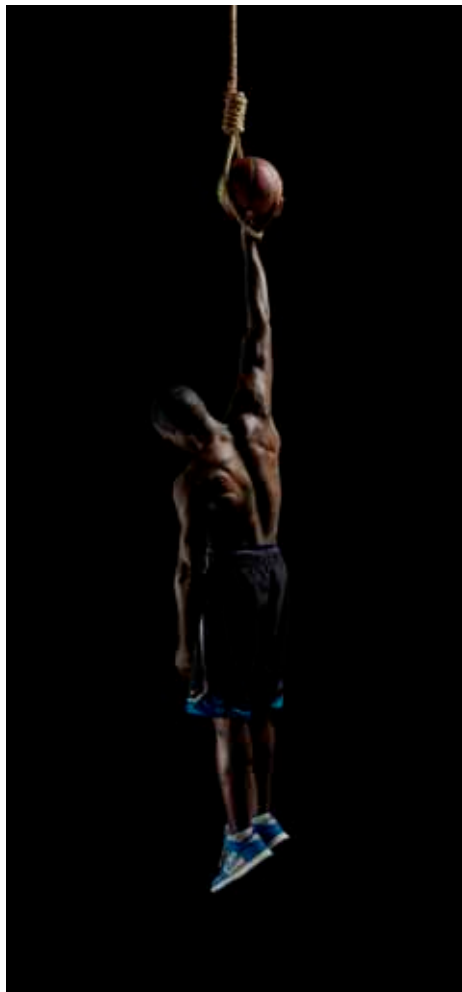


Hank Willis Thomas, below, donated the photo *Strange Fruit*, right, to an exhibit of artwork that will be auctioned in November to benefit The Africa Foundation.



The NEW BLACK

AN ARTIST EXPLORES RACIAL IDENTITY AND STANDARDS IN AMERICA

➔ **Art for Africa New York** will be on display at Sotheby's New York, 1334 York Ave., beginning Nov. 12, and will conclude with an auction Nov. 17. africafoundation.org

Artist Hank Willis Thomas, whose works often focus on themes of identity, history and pop culture, is one of 40 contemporary American and African artists whose work will be displayed and auctioned during Art for Africa New York. The event, sponsored by The Africa Foundation, assists orphaned and needy children in southern and eastern Africa. A longtime supporter of the foundation, Watch! caught up with Thomas, whose works are included in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the Museum of Fine Art in Houston, to talk about his creative process, inspiration and life experience. — *Carrie Mackin*

Watch!: Why did you choose the title of Billie Holiday's song "Strange Fruit" for the photograph that you donated?

Hank Willis Thomas: The photograph is very much about race. I recently read a book about the black body as spectacle, and it made me think about what happens to black athletes who step out of line, such as Tiger Woods or Kobe Bryant, and how there's a different standard in which black athletes are criticized in the media, opposed to, say, someone like Ben Roethlisberger. So the work is really trying to talk about the complexities of that.

Watch!: Your *Branded* series and monograph *Pitch Blackness* was a reaction to the shooting of your cousin in 2000. How did that affect your work?

Hank: It inspired me to start making work about things that really affect real people. I was interested in violence and experience as related to the black male body and commodity culture, so my cousin's murder really inspired me to explore that.

Watch!: Your background is in photography, although you do work in other mediums as well. Do you prefer one to the other?

Hank: I've started thinking of myself less as a photographer and more of a photoconceptual artist or new media artist. I want to make work that speaks about popular culture but isn't limited to just being about one medium, although I have the most fun with photography. I can retouch or remove text or objects or images as a way of retelling history.

Watch!: You've traveled to Africa over the past several years. How do you interpret race relations there, and has that influenced you?

Hank: I've been to Ghana, Angola, Senegal and South Africa, and those countries have very different relationships to race or blackness, specifically because there are so many diverse ethnicities on the continent. I feel that South Africa's relationship to race is understood the same way as it is in the U.S., due to its relatively recent relationship with apartheid, whereas in Senegal there isn't such a highly visible class of Europeans who dominated the culture and identity. My first trip to South Africa really made me realize that blackness is a cultural fabrication; when one country or countries don't agree what it means to be black, there has to be something wrong with the notion. That's when I started to question the relevance of race defined by others.